

A ROYAL MARAUDER

Red Fox Waited a Long Time for His Vengeance But It Came at Last

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THE den of the great red fox was in a little well-drained hollow in the crest of the ridge, under a high and naked rock, and surrounded by an expanse of rocky debris and harsh scrub where the scent would not lie. This was the place for security, a security which Red Fox, by reason of his many triumphant raids upon the farm-yards of the valley settlements, particularly needed. Here the woolly little red-fox puppies could play about the mouth of the den without any risk. So remote and inaccessible, indeed, was the retreat, that the old foxes, wary as they were, took no pains to hide the entrance or conceal the evidences of their occupancy. The ground about the hole was littered with the skins of rabbits, woodchucks and squirrels, with feathers, and also with the big spike-tails of muskrats.

In this retreat Red Fox and his family had few neighbors to intrude upon their privacy. Over the naked ridge-crest the winds blew steadily, sometimes humming to a gale; but they never disturbed the quiet of that deep pocket in the rocks, with its little plot of bright, bare soil where the young foxes mauled each other in the sun. No matter what the direction of the wind, no matter from what quarter the driven rain came slanting, the hollow was perfectly protected.

On the top of the bare rock which partly overhung it from the north Red Fox would sometimes lie and watch, with eyes half closed and mouth half open, the world of green and brown and purple and blue outspread below and around him. Far down, on both sides of the ridge, he would note the farmers of both valleys getting in their crops, and the ceaseless, monotonous toiling of the patient teams. And far over to the eastward he would eye the bold heights of old Ringwaak, with the crow-haunted fir-groves on its flanks, and plan to go foraging over there some day, for sheer restlessness of curiosity.

But though neighbors were few up here, there was one pair on whom Red Fox and his mate looked with strong disapproval, not unmixed with anxiety. On an inaccessible ledge, in a ravine a little way down the other side of the ridge toward Ringwaak, was the nest of a white-headed eagle. It was a great, untidy, shapeless mass, a cart-load of sticks, as it were, apparently dropped from the skies upon this bare ledge, but in reality so interwoven with each point of rock, and so braced in the crevices, that no tempest could avail to jar its strong foundations.

In a hollow in the top of this mass, on a few wisps of dry grass mixed with feathers and fur, huddled two half naked, fierce-eyed nestlings, their awkward, sprawling, reddish bodies sprinkled with short, black, rapidly growing pin-feathers. All around the outer edges of this huge nest and on the rocks below it were the bones of rabbits and young lambs and minks and woodchucks, with claws and little hoofs and bills and feathers, a hideous conglomeration that attested both the appetites of the nestlings and the hunting prowess of the wide-winged, savage-eyed parents.

Of the eagle pair, the larger, which was the female, had her aerial range over Ringwaak and the chain of lonely lakes the other side of Ringwaak. But the male did all his hunting over the region of the settlements and on toward the Ottanonsis

Valley. Every morning, just after sunrise, his great wings went winnowing mightily just over the crest of the ridge, just over the lofty hollow where Red Fox had his lair. And as the dread shadow, with its sinister rustling of stiff pinions, passed by the little foxes would shrink back into their den, well taught by their father and mother.

When the weather was fine and dry, it was Red Fox's custom to betake himself, on his return from the night's hunting, to his safe lookout on the rocky summit above the den, and there, resting with his nose on his forepaws, to watch the vast and austere dawn roll up upon the world. Sometimes he brought his prey, when it was something worth while like a weasel or woodchuck or duck or rabbit, up to this lonely place to be devoured at leisure, beyond the solicitude of his mate and the irrepresible whimperings of the puppies. He would lie there in the mystic spreading of the gray transparencies of dawn, till the first long fingers of gold light touched his face and the thin flood of amber and rose washed all over the bald top of the rock.

He would watch with ceaseless interest the mother eagle swoop down with narrowed wings into the misty shadows of the valley, then mount slowly, questing, along the slopes of Ringwaak, and finally soar high above the peak, a slowly gyrating speck against the young blue. He would watch the male spring into the air resolutely, beat up the near steep, wing low over his rock, and sail majestically down over the valley farms. Later he would see them return to the nest, from any point of the compass as it might chance, sometimes with a big lake-trout snatched from the industrious fish-hawks, sometimes with a luckless mallard from the reed-beds southward, sometimes with a long-legged, pathetic white lamb from the rough upland pastures. With keenest interest and no small appreciation he would watch the great birds balance themselves, wings half uplifted, on the edge of the nest, and with terrible beak and claws rend the victim to bloody fragments. He marveled at the insatiable appetites of those two ugly nestlings and congratulated himself that his four playful whelps were more comely and less greedy.

One morning when in the gray of earliest dawn he climbed to his retreat with a plump woodchuck in his jaws, it chanced he was in no hurry for his meal. Dropping the limp body till he should feel more relish for it, he lay down to rest and contem-

plate the waking earth. As he lay, the sun rose. The female eagle sailed away toward Ringwaak. The male beat up and up, high above the ridge, and Red Fox paid no more attention to him, being engrossed in the antics of a porcupine that was swinging in a tree-top far below.

But suddenly he heard a sharp, hissing rush of great wings in the air just above him, and glanced upward astonished. The next instant he felt a buffeting wind, huge wings almost smote him in the face, and the dead woodchuck, not three feet away, was snatched up in clutching talons and borne up into the air. With a furious snarl he jumped to his feet; but the eagle, with the prize dangling from his claws, was already far out of reach and slanting down majestically toward his nest.

The insolence and daring of this robbery fixed in Red Fox's heart a

fierce desire for vengeance. He stole down to the ravine that held the airy and prowled about for hours seeking a place where he could climb to the ledge. It was inaccessible however; and the eagles, knowing this, looked down upon his prowlings with disdainful serenity. Then he mounted the near-by cliff and peered down directly into the nest. But finding himself still as far off as ever, and the eagles still undisturbed, he gave up the hope of an immediate settlement of his grudge and lay in wait for the chances of the wilderness.

He was frank enough, however, in his declaration of war; for whenever the eagle went winging low over his rocky lookout he would rise and snarl up at him defiantly. The great bird would bend his flight lower, as if to accept this challenge; but having a wise respect for those long jaws and white fangs which the fox displayed so liberally, he took care not to come within their reach.

A few days later, while Red Fox was hunting down in the valley, the fox-puppies were playing just in the mouth of the den when they saw their slim mother among the rocks. In a puppy-like frolic of welcome they rushed to meet her, feeling secure in her nearness. When they were half way across the open in front of the den there came a sudden shadow above them. Like a flash they scattered—all but one, which crouched flat and stared irresolutely. There was a dreadful, whistling sound in the air, a pounce of great flapping wings and wide-reaching talons, a strangled yelp of terror, and before the mother fox's leap could reach the spot the red puppy was snatched up and carried away to the beaks of the eaglets.

When he learned about this Red Fox felt such fury as his philosophic spirit had never known before. He paid another futile visit to the foot of the eagles' rock; and afterward for days wasted much time from his hunting in the effort to devise some means of getting at his foe. He followed the eagle's flight and foraging persistently, seeking to be on the spot when the robber made a kill. But the great bird had such a wide range that this effort seemed likely to be a vain one. In whatsoever region Red Fox might lie in wait, in some other would the eagle make his kill. With its immeasurable superiority in power of sight, the royal marauder had no trouble in avoiding his enemy's path, so that Red Fox was under surveillance when he least suspected it.

One day, however, when he was not thinking



In an instant Red Fox was upon him again, reaching up for his neck